

FRENCH ARTISTS SPUR ON AN AMERICAN ART



Frederick Macmonnies.

For the First Time Europe Seeks Inspiration at Our Shores in the Persons of a Group of Modernist French Artists, Who Find Europe Impossible Because of Its War-Drenched Atmosphere--Macmonnies Predicts That the Effect of This Migration Will Be Far-Reaching on Art of America and the Older Continent



Albert Gleizes.

FOR the first time Europe seeks America in matters of art. For the first time European artists journey to our shores to find that vital force necessary to a living and forward-pushing art. And, as voiced by Frederick Macmonnies, the celebrated sculptor, the effect of this migration to our shores is likely to be more far-reaching than even the most enthusiastic now imagine.

When young Marcel Duchamp, known to us as the painter of the famous staircase nude, came over the art world took his journey as a manifestation of curiosity and stood apart in piquant expectancy, confidently waiting for him to express the time-worn disgust with America and its standards generally ladled out to this country by artists. He didn't. He praised, and gloried in the vibrant electricity of this wholly new and young and strong force in the world. And then came Albert Gleizes, one of the foremost of French cubists, and his wife, Juliette Roche Gleizes, on their honeymoon, and fast on their heels Francis Picabia and Frederick Macmonnies, and Jean and Ivonne Crotti, and fluttering in their wake letters from their artist colleagues in the trenches announcing that they, too, were spending their spare time studying English, because they intended to come to the United States as soon as the war ceased.

And New York awoke to find that it is witnessing a French invasion—an invasion of the young and rebellious in the art of Europe, which will give of itself to the art of the United States, and in turn take from us what we have to offer. And that, in the words of these artists, is life, in contradistinction to the living death of Europe, a stagnation that was felt a year or two before war actually began.

And if we are to furnish the buoyancy of crude life to these newcomers, they in turn will pay us with what is perhaps equally necessary, the courage to break from the tradition of Europe. And it is an American who has lived and achieved in Europe who points this out.

EVERY ARTIST AN ASSET.

"Conditions on the other side," explains Mr. Macmonnies, "are bound to work enormously toward raising the status of art in this country. How permanent the effect will be depends upon the scope the movement attains before some degree of stability is resumed in Europe. I believe that this is the inception of a brilliant era for America.

"I look upon this awakened interest in America as a most fortunate and significant thing. America should welcome with open arms all the artists who will come over. The effect of this movement is likely to be more far-reaching than even the most enthusiastic now imagine. Artists of every sort ought to be welcomed. Every artist, no matter what his ideals may be, or whether his work be comprehensible or not to the majority, is a valuable asset. If he be only in earnest, each artist may influence the tide. Revolutionary tendencies are always healthy tendencies. They open up fresh channels, and incidentally an era which will eliminate the age hallowed necessity of going abroad to study, through this sudden and potent pilgrimage of artistic Europe to our free shores.

"I think that the time is surely approaching when American students will not need to go outside their native land to acquire even technique. This new impetus ought to result in the establishment of wholly comprehensive schools. It may be that a system of scholarships will be established. Indeed, I look for all sorts of growth."

But a warning against the tendency that would make this new art impetus nationalistic is sounded by Albert Gleizes, who, in happy phrasing, voices a sturdy thesis of universality. He points out that art is not a thing of geography, but of persons. The individual is of highest importance. But in Europe, he assures us, the individual is being utterly annihilated. Governments are assuming a despotic sway over the lives of all men, and in this crude reversion to barbaric ethics the individual is lost.

In America, Francis Picabia, another prominent "modernist" painter, asserts, the art of the future will be found attaining a new and gorgeous florescence. The spirit of America seems subtly, yet powerfully, akin to the spirit of artistic creation. There is a fearlessness and a newness about it which sends hope racing through one's arteries. The boundlessness of our national aspirations sets a dashing pace for the equal boundlessness of artistic enterprise. In short, art and life here seem to discover a wonderful consanguinity.

But M. De Zayas, a staunch friend of the "modernists" in this country, and who has just established the "modern" gallery, devoted to furthering the interests of contemporary art, does not hesitate to state that the real potentiality of the American nation is still awaiting, the magic of an artist's touch to spring forth in pristine, free expression. America has yet to find herself.

"America has the same complex mentality as the modern artist; the same eternal sequence of emotions and sensibility to surroundings; the same continual need of expressing itself in the present and for the present," he says.

Of course, the artists now arriving from Europe and establishing studios here are not entering a field entirely devoid of artistic achievement. Much has been done. American artists have been laying a very commendable groundwork. What it is firmly believed this invasion of Europe will accomplish is the infusion of great buoyancy and zest to the entire art movement in this country. The tendency will be to broaden, deepen and enrich all productivity. But it is by no means the native element which is being and is destined to be influenced. The newcomers, one and all, frankly acknowledge a rejuvenation of spirit, in some cases even a vital renaissance of ideal. Francis Picabia, for example, admits to having put all former things behind him and to having grasped the genius of American machinery as the new medium through which his art may be expressed.

Motion is the very heart of progress. When a thing becomes static its days are numbered. This shifting of field from Europe to America implies a ceaseless alertness which proves art virile and assertive. Its never ending growth is mirrored in the life of the individual artist. The highest intelligence seems that which recognizes, even in the full flush of any given "period," that there must be a wane and a new rising. Marcel Duchamp corroborates this eternal individual development. "I am never deceived, myself, into thinking that I have at length hit upon the ultimate expression. In the midst of each epoch I fully realize that a new epoch will dawn."

As with the artist, so it is with art. Boundaries are not recognized. Art soars free and unimpeded toward ever higher and higher goals. If the march of events in the world prohibits this desired untrammelled flight, then art will brood till a gate is opened. Now a gate has been opened. It has been thrown wide. America lies beyond it, and here is revived that hope which charges genius with the precious fire of achievement.

And their individual reasons for coming, merged into a composite, amount to the fact that all air, all life, is stifled by the war.

"The people of Europe have become brutes," cried Albert Gleizes, foremost of French cubists, and probably one of the two or three cubists of note in the world who so style themselves. "Individuality is utterly lost in a struggle whose butchery and terror have raised governments into the attitude of despots. Force has taken the place of reason and right. All the best blood of Europe is being spilled. In the end there will be left only old men, women and babies."

"So far as art is concerned, the war is bound to have the most deadly influence upon it. Not alone is it impossible for artists to work abroad at this time, but when peace is finally established a state of exhaustion will impel the greatest artistic death Europe has perhaps ever known. A generation will be skipped.

When the babies have grown up, there may be a new group of artists. But what must be their heritage? Imbued with the precepts of war, they will be vitally handicapped from the beginning. Art nurtures art. War destroys it.

"This frightful condition is shared by all Europe. The individual is being crushed, or welded into a vast instrument to be swayed by the despots who control all destiny there today. And art, being essentially an expression of the individual, must be lost in the terrible gulf which is claiming manhood and all the better ideals of civilization. A condition of absolute barbarism is being rapidly achieved.

"I could not work in Paris. After serving at the front until relieved by sickness, I tried to take up the old threads in Paris. I could not concentrate on the canvas. I could not think. Mangled bodies would be carried through the streets. Everywhere one heard nothing but the horror of war, saw nothing but war's agonizing blight. I laid my brushes aside. It was impossible.

"We came to America, and what a change! Here everything is calm and ordered. The individual counts. Here art is possible. You see, I have already resumed my painting."

The artist displayed a cubist impression of Broadway.

"New York inspires me tremendously. I find life baffling in many respects. Walking through the streets of this great city, I have, not infrequently, a feeling of being hemmed in and even crushed. This is perhaps partly due to the height of the buildings, but also to the movement of humanity, streaming so steadily, so fixed of purpose, knowing so exactly where the goal lies. In Paris there is a maze of little streets. Life goes with starts and stops. It is much more devious and complex. But New York is a very thrilling place. It stimulates me, and the glamour increases as I become more and more accustomed to the trend of things.

"The skyscrapers are works of art. They are creations in iron and stone which equal the most admired old world creations. And the great bridges here—they are as admirable as the most celebrated cathedrals. The genius who built the Brooklyn Bridge is to be classed alongside the genius who built Notre Dame de Paris. The same spirit underlies all supreme achievements. It is a very mistaken impression that one must go to Europe to see beautiful things."

"True art never is a matter of schools," Mr. Gleizes said in the course of our conversation. "It is universal, of all time and for all time. If it must be divided at all, it should be portioned into epochs. It is a thing of persons and not of cult. Nor is there, in any but the most superficial sense, a French school, a German school, an Italian school. The same emotions are felt all over the earth. People are merely people. The manifestations of art may be extremely various. This is illustrated, I think, by a comparison already made—a comparison involving American skyscrapers and bridges and European palaces and churches. The same impulse to portray animates artists in every land.

"I am here in America to study American life. I mean to travel a good deal. And I hope to do a lot of work. Work is a pleasure in America. There is inspiration and there is peace. In Paris there was nothing but hideous distraction. I'm glad I have turned my back on that terrible nightmare."

Mme. Gleizes was quieter and less outspoken than her husband regarding the state of affairs in Europe and their influence upon art. But she spoke feelingly of the attractiveness of life on this side of the ocean and echoed his assurance that one could devote oneself to art in this country, where it was impossible to do so abroad.

Madame Gleizes is a poet as well as a painter. "I have written nothing at all since the war came upon us," she said, wistfully. "Life in Europe is little conducive to poetry. But now I am here, in this wonderful, free country, I think that inspiration will shine again for me. I hope to write a poem a little later on ex-

pressing my profound happiness in the revelations that America has afforded me."

Francis Picabia, one of the three or four most prominent "modernists" of France, served eight months in the French army, after which he was recalled, and he arrived in New York four months ago, and will remain at least as long as a secret mission continues to demand his presence here—perhaps all the rest of his life, if this can be arranged.

"This visit to America," the painter enthusiastically maintained, "has brought about a complete revolution in my methods of work. I began as a landscape painter, was later classed as a cubist, and gradually came into my own—which is a state I cannot otherwise classify than entirely individual. But prior to leaving Europe I was engrossed in presenting psychological studies through the mediumship of forms which I created. Almost immediately upon coming to America it flashed on me that the genius of the modern world is machinery, and that through machinery art ought to find a most vivid expression."

MACHINERY THE SOUL OF HUMAN LIFE.

"I have been profoundly impressed by the vast mechanical development in America. The machine has become more than a mere adjunct of human life. It is really a part of human life—perhaps the very soul. In seeking forms through which to interpret ideas or by which to expose human characteristics I have come at length upon the form which appears most brilliantly plastic and fraught with symbolism. I have enlisted the machinery of the modern world, and introduced it into my studio.

"Naturally, form has come to take precedence over color with me, though when I began painting color predominated. Slowly my artistic evolution carried me from color to form, and while I still employ color, of course, it is the drawing which assumes the place of first importance in my pictures.

"Of course, I have only begun to work out this newest stage of evolution. I don't know what possibilities may be in store. I mean to simply work on and on until I attain the pinnacle of mechanical symbolism. Since coming to America I have painted a great deal. My brush has been very busy. And for two reasons. First and foremost, naturally, is the fact that I have a whole new scheme to evolve. But a very important item is the fact that in America work of an artistic nature is possible where it is utterly impossible in Europe today. The war has killed the art of the Continent utterly. Even those who miserably try to seclude themselves and find a little nook where work may be carried on undisturbed find that distractions creep in. The horror of war is everywhere. It penetrates to the furthest outposts. In America work is possible. I am making the most of my time.

"Since machinery is the soul of the modern world, and since the genius of machinery attains its highest expression in America, why is it not reasonable to believe that in America the art of the future will flower most brilliantly?"

M. De Zayas, founder of the "Modern Gallery," has said: "America waits, inertly, for its own potentiality to be expressed in art." Which seems quite in line with the sentiment expressed by the man who has painted him.

"In all times," De Zayas goes on to say, "art has been the synthesis of the beliefs of peoples. In America this synthesis is an impossibility because all beliefs exist here together. One lives here in a continuous change, which makes impossible the perpetuation and the universality of an idea. History in the United States is impossible and meaningless. One lives here in the present, in a continuous struggle to adapt one's self to the milieu. There are innumerable social groups which work to obtain general laws. But no one observes them. Each individual remains isolated, struggling for his own physical and intellectual existence. In the United States there is no general sentiment in any sphere of thought. America has the same complex mentality as the modern

artist; the same eternal sequence of emotions and sensibility to surroundings; the same continual need of expressing itself in the present and for the present, with joy in action, and with indifference to 'arriving.' For it is in action that America, like the modern artist, finds joy."

M. Picabia firmly believes that America is destined to become the high court of the "modernists." Not only does he find the American spirit, as his friend De Zayas has expressed it, peculiarly one with the spirit of the modern artists themselves, but he believes the present invasion of European artists is bound to add a great buoyancy and zest to the whole art movement in this country.

M. Crotti, another of the French contingent, is not a cubist. He does not arbitrarily classify his work. And this emancipation from facile identification is carried to the extent of merely numbering his productions, and never conferring a name.

"I do not think the name should be necessary to an understanding of a canvas. Art should be self-expressing. It is not with nature I am concerned, but with ideas. I paint my thoughts. Whatever objects may enter into the composition are wholly arbitrary. They are sheer pretext. It is only the subtle arrangement of color and form that counts. I do not attempt to portray anything but ideas."

The Crotti's have been in America several months, though they are newcomers to this city. Directly upon landing they travelled into the Middle West, where they have been visiting friends.

"I found a wonderful new calm out there," explained M. Crotti. "Coming straight out of the turmoil of wartime Europe, this presence of quiet is a most striking thing. Almost immediately the spirit of the altered life began exerting a benign influence. I found it possible to take up my brush, which had been so long relinquished on account of the multiple distractions of war. I have done a number of paintings since arriving in America.

"New York is very stimulating. Of course, so far as direct inspiration is concerned, I bring to my work the same attitude of mind here as elsewhere. I do not portray what I see but what I feel. My work is quite the reverse of M. Gleizes's, for example. The same distinctions encountered in the realm of literature and of music may be attributed also to painting. Either you are a realist or you are an idealist. These words"—and Marcel Duchamp also expressed himself very similarly in this regard—"do not at all adequately cover the two attitudes of mind. But they are the words most familiarly used to distinguish the two."

NEW YORK THE CRADLE OF ART?

Mme. Crotti, also an artist, does work quite distinct from her husband's. While she has done large paintings, her true forte is a kind of exquisite miniature.

It would be hard to fancy the artist sitting down to fashion her exquisite little brush poems in the midst of broiling Europe.

"Are you happy to be in America?" I asked her.

"Oh, yes," she replied, "very, very happy. One can breathe over here. I hope to accomplish so much. We're going to spend the winter in this big, wonderful city. Do you think the Americans will care for these little pictures? I am so anxious to go on and on."

Her husband supplemented her enthusiasm.

"We both find America very stimulating," he said. "And do you know, it seems very possible to me that New York is destined to become the artistic centre of the world. Art certainly isn't possible in Europe, and will not be for a long time. But art is very thrillingly possible over here. It is an era of tremendous readjustment. I think it quite possible that New York will come to be looked upon as the cradle of art, usurping the proud place enjoyed so long by Paris and other important European cities. This is the first time that Europe has been impelled to seek anything artistic in America. It has always been the other way about. Americans have come over

to us. Now we are coming over to you. Of course, it is impossible to say how extensive this revolution may proceed, but the present restless movement cannot fail to have a profound influence on the artistic status of America."

I asked whether an ultimate American school of art would be the result.

"Oh, now," he replied decidedly, "not that. Art has nothing to do with nationality. If we come over here it is not to infuse the American spirit into our work, but rather to seek that freedom from turmoil which is impossible at home. When you artists, in the past, have gone over to Europe to study with famous masters, they have not, or only in rare cases, renounced their nationality, or assumed any attitude discounting individual point of view. As a rule, they have come over, learned what Europe had to teach, and then returned. That is the way with the European artists who are now coming over to America. Only with us it is impossible to say how long our residence may be. Even should peace be soon declared in Europe, conditions would not be favorable for a long time to come. I think New York will become a permanent home of artists before the older centres are in a position to encourage a renewal of artistic endeavor."

And the Quartier Latin? Do these artists forget it?

"I assure you," says Marcel Duchamp, "the Quartier Latin is a gloomy endroit these days. The old gay life is all vanished. The studios are dimly lit. Art has gone dusty. You know, at the outbreak of the war all Latin Quarter cafés closed up at 8 o'clock in the evening. When I abandoned Paris last spring the hour had been advanced to 10:30. But it is a very different life from the happy, stimulating life one used to encounter. Paris is like a deserted mansion. Her lights are out. One's friends are all away at the front. Or else they have been already killed."

"I came over here, not because I couldn't paint at home, but because I hadn't any one to talk with. It was frightfully lonely. I was excused from service on account of my teeth. So I roamed about all alone. Everywhere the talk turned upon war. Nothing but war was talked from morning until night. In such an atmosphere, especially for one who holds war to be an abomination, it may readily be conceived existence was heavy and dull."

"So far as painting goes—it is a matter of indifference to me where I am. Art is purely subjective, and the artist should be able to work in one place quite as well as another. But I love an active and interesting life. I have found such a life most abundantly in New York. I am very happy here. Perhaps rather too happy. For I have not painted a single picture since coming over."

"From a psychological standpoint I find the spectacle of war very impressive. The instinct which sends men marching out to die down other men is an instinct worthy of careful scrutiny. What an absurd thing such a conception of patriotism is! Fundamentally all people are alike. Personally I must say I admire the attitude of combating invasion with folded arms. Could that but become the universal attitude, how simple the intercourse of nations would be."

This young artist's studio in Beekman Place contains a few of his paintings. The celebrated "Nude Descending the Stair" is at present on exhibition in San Francisco. Monsieur Duchamp carefully explained that this work is not cubist, that none of his work is cubist. Like Madame Gleizes, he is doing things his own way. I asked whether he were still painting after the manner of the "Nude."

"Oh, no," he answered. "I have passed that long ago. My methods are constantly changing. My most recent work is utterly unlike anything that preceded it."

"Do you think, monsieur, that you will find in America a public capable of appreciating your work?"

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Jean Crotti.



Ivonne Crotti.



Francis Picabia.



Juliette Roche Gleizes.



Marcel Duchamp.